

Jim Hoagland

Security And Hyperbole

The National Security Revitalization Act is a small rock tumbling along the path of a big avalanche waiting to happen. This pursuit of short-term political gain on foreign policy by House Republicans should relaunch the grand debate on America's national security that has fitfully erupted and then quickly subsided several times since the end of the Cold War.

Part of Newt Gingrich's "Contract With America," the act passed the House on Feb. 16 and awaits Senate action. It regulates the president's powers to deal with the United Nations and to manage defense spending. Its practical effect is to stigmatize the United Nations at President Clinton's expense and pick up knee-jerk anti-U.N. votes for the GOP.

You would not know that from the administration's reaction, which has been to threaten a veto and ring alarm bells about the end of civilization as we know it. Clinton's people believe there are knee-jerk gains for them in counter-stigmatizing the Republicans as isolationists, chiming up all the echoes of Smoot, Hawley and Hoover that still reside in the American subconscious.

The two camps resemble competing con men trying out their patter on each other before taking it public. Dick Arme & Co. pitch the act as the republic's salvation from rampant U.N. peacekeeping; Dick Gephardt & Co. portray it as a Darth Vader death ray for presidential authority. There is a whiff of mutual admiration in each side's escalating hyperbole.

Stripped bare, the act is to conservative Republicans in the 1990s what the War Powers Act was for liberal Democrats in the 1970s: an exercise in political accountability not to be applied to real-life crises. The GOP legislation leaves Clinton just as free as he now is to deploy U.S. troops for U.N. peacekeeping—as long as the president issues an executive order publicly explaining that the deployment is in the national

interest. The United Nations is his friend, not ours, the Republicans will then chortle.

That element of political accountability—and the serious provision of the act that would cut U.S. funding for U.N. peacekeeping—is precisely why this flawed legislation is the place to begin a national debate about America's reliance on and involvement with international institutions to protect national interests. If they are serious about this legislation, the Republicans present an alternative vision of the future in which America will go it alone without counting on a bunch of ragheads from the Third World and fops from Europe.

It is as a friend of mine says: Tell

me what you criticize and I will tell you who you are. The Democrats enacted symbolic restrictions on the president's war powers as a result of Vietnam, a debacle created by liberal interventionists. Similarly, the well-meaning effort by George Bush and Colin Powell to provide the huge U.S. and NATO military establishment a new humanitarian mission by sending troops to Somalia is at the root of today's Republican retreat from international military coalitions. (The Somali mission was inherited, and bungled, by Clinton, with massive help in the bungling from the Pentagon.)

The liberals sought to bring the boys home in an era when they equated the use of American military power abroad with evil and/or incompetence. Today conservatives see the dispatching of American troops abroad as nefarious, overly dangerous, and/or politically costly for those who advocate it.

There is a political cycle akin to the business cycle of expansion and recession at work here. The two-party system requires each party to restrain and correct its own, and each other's, excesses, in domestic and foreign policy, or lose power.

Clinton's 1992 victory shook modern Washington out of the mild catatonic state it slips into when presidents grow distracted, dispirited and/or distant, as post-Desert Storm Bush had. But Somalia and Boris Yeltsin's decline in Russia dulled the new administration's enthusiasm for serious redefinition of America's role in the new abroad, beyond worthy efforts at denuclearizing the former Soviet Union and chasing trade and big business deals in Asia.

The Republicans, bless them, have shaken the city awake and refocused the Clintonites on big principles. I believe the administration has the better part of the argument on national security, which can be protected by American leadership or international coalitions. The House-passed measure should be defeated in the Senate.

But the administration has an obligation to can the hysteria and point-scoring. Its leaders should come back to their early efforts to persuade the nation that American security is best protected by serious efforts on two fronts: to build and manage effective international coalitions and to reshape obviously inadequate international institutions, including the United Nations, into bodies that do contribute to global stability and American interests. There lies the future.